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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the unique challenges posed by executives in MBA (Masters of Business Administration) programs and how these challenges can be met insofar as the core information technology (IT) course is concerned, drawing on the experience of the teachers' across four programs, live and on video, over two years, involving more than 250 executive participants. The first section of the paper provides background, including: assumptions about students and course structure; implications for course design related to student learning objectives, student attitude/values, content, structure, experience, time, and evaluation; and the executive MBA environment for this study, as well as issues specific to IT. The student evaluation scheme for a course designed from these assumptions, implications, and environment is presented, including criteria for class participation, learning log, group presentation, and technology book article. An outline of an eight-session information management course is appended. (MES)

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DESIGNING A CORE IT COURSE FOR EXECUTIVE MBA PROGRAMS: OBJECTIVES, STRUCTURE, DELIVERY, AND LESSONS

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INTRODUCTION

Professional development and lifelong learning are increasingly important components of organizations' efforts to enhance the knowledge and skill levels of their employees. At the same time, individual managers in organizations have come to appreciate the marketability and mobility that professional and graduate courses afford their careers. It's no wonder, then, that in North America and elsewhere, millions of dollars have been spent, and will continue to be spent, on executive business education (Brecka and Rubach, 1995). For example, a recent count of Executive MBA programs totaled 300 in U.S. News (1997).

The goal of this paper is to share our experience and insights regarding the unique challenges posed by executives in MBA programs, and how these challenges may be met insofar as the core information technology course is concerned. In order to do so, we will draw on our experience across four programs, live and on video, over the past two years, involving over 250 executive participants.

BACKGROUND

Professional development is not without its challenges. It differs from other more formal, longer duration or ongoing courses such as semester-type university courses in two ways. First, professional development courses focus on older, adult learners. Slowey (1988) points out that adult learners have usually completed some formal education and are seeking professional development courses to further their careers. They rely on their work experience as a basis for assessing the value of the learning process, and measure this value in terms of self-fulfillment. Second, the content of the learning activities is more focused and delivered in a shorter period of time. This learning intensity is due to the limited time the participants have to participate in the activities, and assumptions about the existing knowledge that participants have about the topic.

Executive MBA (EMBA) programs are typically targeted at mid- to low-senior level managers who wish to enhance their marketability and career prospects without incurring the opportunity cost of leaving their jobs for the one or two years full-time MBA programs require. They are seeking primarily to enhance their upward mobility, not change careers

EMBAs, as a subset of professional development, share a number of common characteristics with other such courses (Chung, 1991): they focus on adult learners, and the intrinsic motivation that they bring to the educational experience; they focus on a relatively narrow topic domain; and they are usually for a limited time.

The challenge, then, within the IT component of these programs, is to design a course that:

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- Interests the students, successfully leverages their experience, and is relevant to the decisions they will be making.

- Is well-integrated with the remainder of the curriculum.

- Provides them the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities they will need as senior managers with respect to information technology.

- Is mindful of the time, focus, and other constraints they face as managers with demanding, full-time occupations.

Assumptions

Compared to traditional two-year on-campus MBA programs, there is an array of assumptions (and observations) that influence course design for executive MBA study.

Students
- More focused, highly motivated
- Older, more experienced
- More disciplined in their work habits
- Have competing priorities for their time and attention
- Less time for background reading
- Demand regular and personal feedback
- More focus on "here" -- (what is happening in the office?)
- More focus on "now" -- (what is happening in the office today?)

Structure
- Longer sessions
- Longer intervals between sessions
- Less face-to-face class time overall
- Only one course (eight sessions) in IT – no options available

Implications for Course Design

These assumptions have implications for course design. In executive MBA programs, the consequences of poor design can be catastrophic. So can 'sins of omission' -- tolerated by university students but forcefully dealt with by executive participants. These sins, both of omission and commission, can be avoided by incorporating students' strengths while addressing their weaknesses and anxieties directly. In our experience, a well designed EMBA course takes into consideration:

Student Learning Objectives
- High value placed on useful content
- Higher value placed on insight (A-ha!), but
- Lower tolerance for divergent learning processes

Student Attitude/Values
- Very low tolerance for 'wasting time'
- Very low tolerance for poor organization
- Very low tolerance for faculty who don't work as hard as the students

Content
- There is less content [than in a regular MBA], and
- Less time to cover the content

Structure
- Each session must stand on its own, as well as being part of a series, yet
- Links among sessions must be strong

Experience
- More experience can compensate for less content and less class time.
- There are 'experts' in the class whose knowledge may be integrated into the class experience
- The role of group study/learning is critical
- Group projects and group presentations have high value

Time
- Each session is more 'valuable', requires more preparation by the student
- Each session is more 'valuable', and requires much more preparation by the faculty.

Evaluation
- Examinations have limited value -- for both evaluation and learning
- On-going individual hand-in material has high value -- for both learning and evaluation
- Need for short feedback cycle (assignments marked and returned)
- Group activities require control mechanisms to prevent 'free riders'
- Group activities may inflate grades overall
- Group activities may reduce variance among individual grades

The Environment

Executive MBA programs have much in common. Here is the particular EMBA environment for this study.

- A classroom-based program (EMBA) and a video-conferenced program (VEMBA)
- Tuition over $30,000 per year ($50,000 for the video-conferenced program) – paid by sponsor
- Duration two years, 10 months a year (September-to-June), average of one class day per week.
- Two topics per class day (e.g. Finance and Marketing)
- All courses compulsory, no options
- Each course between eight and 12 half-day sessions
- Between 60 and 120 students in each year (e.g. EMBA Class of 99).
- Large years divided into sections of about 60 students each.
- Full time in-residence periods of one/two weeks at beginning of each semester.
- Class time about 70% of full-time MBA program
- For video-conferenced MBA, about 40% of sessions in residence -- face-to-face.
- Email available among students, faculty, and administration
- Each class year (e.g. EMBA 2000) administered by a full time manager who coordinates events, classes, timetables, resources, students and faculty.

There are further issues specific to IT:

- High variance in IT knowledge among students
- High IT anxiety among some students
- High IT arrogance/knowledge among a few other students
- Very low student tolerance for reading 800-page introductory IT texts
- Choosing a balance among IT technical content, IT industry knowledge, and understanding the role of IT (and the CIO) in organizations
- Choosing themes with which all students can identify (bridging between IT poets and IT geeks)
- Creating a design that reduces anxiety
- Creating a design that provides useful learning regardless of IT IQ
- Creating a design that evaluates relative learning, rather than absolute learning.

The Design

The design follows from these assumptions, implications, and environment. In this extended abstract we will touch only a typical half-day session, the evaluation criteria, and a schematic overview of the course. Further detail will be available in the final paper.

A TYPICAL SESSION

There are six to eight sessions to a course. A typical four-hour session has:

Two case discussions
Two group presentations

See the appended schematic outline for a course overview.

EVALUATION

The evaluation scheme is designed to minimize the penalty for IT ignorance and anxiety by allowing students to:

- (for individual assignments) conduct research to craft their response,
- (for group assignments) exploit their non-IT skills as part of a team while learning assignment content

There are four evaluation opportunities, each weighted equally.

- Class participation (25%)
- Learning log (25%)
- Group presentation (25%)
- Technology article (25%)

There is no examination.

Class Participation (25%)

This is a traditional component of a case-based course. Contribution can take many forms, not the least of which is asking questions and directing the discussion to new areas of importance. High participation grades are often achieved by "low technology" students who demand to be shown the relevance of IT for the business. This is where the extra five to fifteen years' EMBA experience pays off – both for the student and the class. Of course, if the class contains CIO, that is a bonus.

The criteria for evaluation are frequency and content.

- **Frequency**. Most students should be contributing regularly in class. This counts.

- **Quality**. A single memorable contribution can be sufficient, but most students should contribute regularly. Quality check on faculty evaluation: ask each student at the end of the course to list which [three?] student[s] have contributed most to their learning – and reward those students appropriately.

Learning Log (25%)

This document is the opportunity for each student to communicate relative learning by preparing an executive summary for each session. The guidelines are:

- one page per class, single spaced (or even handwritten)
- do NOT include class handouts, class notes
- record ideas and thoughts in several dimensions
- What did I learn? Specifically? Generally?
- What have I seen in the past that is now seen in a new light?
- What can I take back to the office?
- What have I seen in the EMBA program in other courses which links to this material?
- Etc.

Evaluation of logs is straightforward:

- **Form**. One page per session? Required dimensions included?
- **Content**. Could the student pick up the log and read it one year from now, and recapture the essence of the course from the log itself – without resorting to class notes? The answer should be 'yes'.

Group Presentation (25%)

Each student participates in a 20-minute team presentation of a leading edge technology. The teams are ready-formed as learning groups for other tasks in the EMBA program. Topics are selected from a 'leading edge technology" list. The team also prepares a two-page hand-out for the class, and a five page report for the instructor.

Evaluation is distributed among the deliverables: presentation, hand-out, and report. Usually, EMBAs respond well to strict enforcement of the required timing, form, and delivery. Not everyone needs to participate on presentation day, though it is presumed they participated in the research. The mark is a group mark.

Technology Book Article (25%)

The purpose of this task is to have each student "learn about learning about information technology". It is similar to the Group Presentation in this dimension, but it is an individual activity. They must prepare a four-page article on the IT industry, e.g. a best selling book, an industry player, new applications for management, or emerging (even embryo) technology. The articles are bound into a book – e.g. The EMBA Class of 99 IT Book– to be shared among the whole class. So far, the book is good reading!

LESSONS

The lessons from the experience reinforce the need to consider the design of EMBA courses differently from traditional courses, and similarly reinforce the onerous penalty the instructor can pay for 'sins of omission' in the execution of the design. This suggests a demanding environment where you are "lucky if you do, damned if you don't". In summary:

- This is a relationship driven activity. The concepts are sold one seat at a time. The participants expect it.
- The context must be up-to-date – which means teaching from the pages of the Wall Street Journal and -- in Canada -- the Globe and Mail.
- Leverage the participant's experience – recognize it, call upon it.
- The entertainment quotient must be high.

Finally, the instructor should recognize the multiple dimensions to the participants' loyalty and attention. They have many responsibilities, monitored and managed using a hi-tech work style: pagers, celphones, muscular notebook computers with wireless LAN cards, etc.

That being said, a successful EMBA course can be an extremely satisfying experience. There is immediate feedback, and when successful, very positive. "I have already participated in decisions which paid for the tuition" is a strong endorsement. Of course, "You really changed my life" is the instructor's wish.

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VEMBA – Class of '99
INFORMATION MANAGEMENT
Professors Peter Newson & Michael Parent
Course-at-a-Glance

SESSIONS	CASES/DISCUSSION	INTEGRATING READINGS & GLOSSARY
1 **INTEGRATION**	**Case:** Merv Griffin's Resorts	**Keen** · Introduction · Architecture
2 **TRANSFORMATION**	**Case:** Frito-Lay Inc.: A Strategic Transition	**Keen** · Chief Information Officer
3 **CONSTRUCTION**	**Case:** Century Tool & Die **Case:** Windemere Trust Co. **Presentations 1 & 2**	**Keen** · Application Software & Application Development · Systems Life Cycle
4 **DELEGATION** **Initial log due March 9, 1998**	**Case:** First Fidelity **Presentations 3 & 4**	**Keen** · Outsourcing **Case** · SAP
5 **COLLABORATION** **VEMBA '99 Book due April 2, 1998**	**Case:** Chemical Bank **Case:** Clearwater Fine Foods **Presentations 5 & 6**	**Keen** · Groupware **Install & Run** · Chemical Bank Lotus Notes Demonstration Software

SESSIONS	CASES/DISCUSSION	INTEGRATIVE READINGS & GLOSSARY
6 **VIRTUALIZATION**	**Case:** Flower Auction Westland **Presentations 7 & 8**	**Keen** - Internet - Information Superhighway **Rayport & Sviokla** Exploiting the Virtual Value Chain
7 **DISINTERMEDIATION**	**Case:** Dominion Trust **Case:** Cisco Systems **Presentations 9 & 10**	**Keen & Ballance** - Cybercash - Home Banking - Nonbank Competition to Banks in Electronic Commerce
8 **GLOBALIZATION** **Final log due June 1, 1998**	**Case:** Singapore TradeNet **Case:** CERNET **Presentations 11 & 12**	**Keen** - Electronic Data Interchange